

Primal yawn

E/6.52A

Nation, and most state voters, ignored controversial primary

By Dane Smith
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No way around it. The revival of Minnesota's presidential primary after a 36-year absence turned out to be a disappointment, even a fiasco, some would say.

Start with a turnout of 10 percent, an embarrassment in a state that prides itself on civic correctness and typically ranks first in the nation in voter participation.

Add an almost total lack of national media interest in the results. Most TV networks and national newspapers didn't even mention the state, mainly because the DFL side of the primary was nonbinding on delegate selection. The winners, President Bush and Arkansas

■ Bill Clinton eked out a 942-vote victory over Jerry Brown in the Minnesota primary. **Page 10A.**

Gov. Bill Clinton, never set foot in the state.

Throw in the anger that many Minnesotans expressed at having to register party affiliation for the first time. A woman who has been an election judge in St. Paul for 25 years said Wednesday that "People yelled at me all day long. I used to love being an election judge."

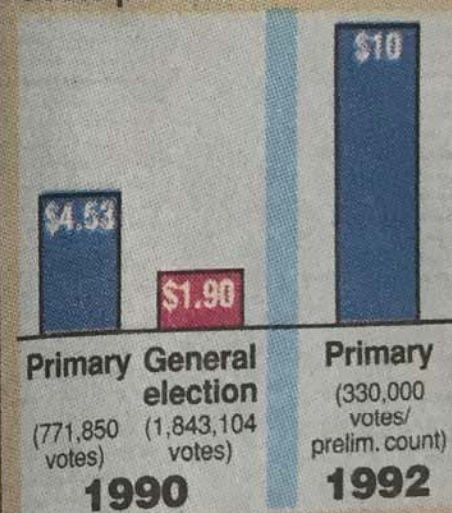
And don't forget the cost: \$3.2 million in the midst of a state and local budget crisis, or about \$10 for every voter.

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The high cost of low turnout

It costs state and local governments more than \$3 million for a statewide election, no matter how many votes are cast. Tuesday's light turnout escalated the cost per voter.

Costs per voter/



Source: Minnesota Secretary of State
Star Tribune Graphic

Primary/ Major changes may be in store for 1996

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Add it all up, and the critics have a strong case for abolishing or making major changes in the 1996 primary.

"I hate to say I told you so, but all it did was increase cynicism," said state Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, who sponsored a bill to postpone the primary until 1996. "The fact that (DFL) votes didn't have any influence on the process sums up why people are so down on the political system these days."

The primary has defenders in both parties. They say it was sabotaged by the DFL Party's defiance of state law — a defiance that apparently has been upheld in courts in other states — or that it was the victim of outside circumstances. Chief among these circumstances are general disen-

chantment with the 1992 presidential candidates and a sweeping and rather scary public alienation from the political process.

Gov. Arne Carlson, the state's most prominent Independent-Republican, is one of those defenders. He said Wednesday that canceling an election is unthinkable, given what's going on in other countries.

"A lot of people died for our right to vote," Carlson said.

He criticized DFLers for refusing to abide by state law, and he noted that despite the low turnout, it was still three to four times the rate of participation in precinct caucuses, the state's traditional method of selecting delegates.

Secretary of State Joan Growe, a

leading DFL proponent of the primary, argued that some problems and confusion were inevitable in the first primary. She noted that school board elections typically have lower turnout than the presidential primary, but that nobody would consider canceling them.

But clearly the current primary law is in for some changes.

The Legislature is certain to consider amending it before 1996, a year that could present a lollapalooza of a primary struggle.

Most observers think two changes are likely: an earlier date and uniform application of the primary results on both parties' delegate-selection processes.

The party registration feature may be

harder to dislodge. Many states operate their primaries with similar requirements, and advocates of strong political parties say it's necessary to prevent crossover voting and to build membership.

The likelihood of outright elimination of the primary does not appear to be great. Carlson will probably veto, as he did in January, any attempt to abolish it over the next two years of his term.

Even Todd Otis, chairman of the DFL Party and an opponent of the primary, described the public reaction to it as "neither a conclusive indictment nor a ringing endorsement."